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COMMENTARY

One answer to Iran: a US naval blockade

If warnings don't work, Reagan could do worse

By Jack Beatty

The next shot the United States fires in anger may not be at Nicaragua but at Iran. Jimmy Carter's old nemesis may soon be Ronald Reagan's new target.

Reagan, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane have all recently issued unambiguous warnings that should any harm befall the five American hostages held by Iran's henchmen among the Shiite terrorists in Lebanon, the United States will take unspecified retaliatory action against Iran. This whiff of verbal gunpowder may have been necessary to deter a new outrage against our nationals, but it has backed us into an awkward corner. If a Shiite dervish shoots one of the hostages, we will either have to strike at Iran, or the future deterrent power of the President's threats will be rendered nil.

Let's assume the worst: A hostage has been killed, a new hostage taken, another embassy bombed. Should the empire strike back, and if so, how?

The justification for using force rests on the connection between the Islamic Jihad terrorists in Lebanon who are holding our hostages (and who, with either Syrian or Iranian help, killed 241 of our Marines) and the Tehran government. Is the former the cat's paw of the latter? Nobody knows what the CIA knows, but the evidence on the public record is suggestive.

According to the Institute for Strategic Studies in London, Iran has between 500 and 1000 of its Islamic Revolutionary Guards stationed at Baalbeck in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Directed by something called The War Against Satan Committee in Tehran (Satan, dear reader, is you and me), their Guard's task is to train Shiite terrorists and to indoctrinate them in a, thus far, risk-free enmity toward the United States, whose Marines and diplomats they have harried out of Lebanon, and a far riskier enmity toward Israel, whose retreat from Lebanon they are making an agony. Though short of "proof," this would seem to be more than the merely "shadowy" connection it is often called in the press. In any case, the United States government is satisfied

that, in McFarlane's words, there is "sufficient evidence that radical Shiite terrorists are responsive to Iranian guidance for us to hold Iran responsible for... attacks against United States citizens, property and interests."

The military options

What are our military options against Iran? A retaliatory air strike at the terrorist base in Baalbeck would put our fliers at risk, and it would be "messy from the moral point of view," says Alvin Bernstein, a strategist on the faculty of the Naval War College. The moral messiness would come from the killing of civilians, which is a great wrong no matter who does it or why, and which also looks bad on the 6 o'clock news. Scratch that option.

An air strike against Iran itself (Kharg Island, its petro-terminal, is often mentioned as a target) might be counterproductive, says Bernstein; for it would almost certainly give a fillip to Iranian national morale just when the Ayatollah needs it most - after last month's fright-

fully costly defeat at the hand of Iraq, Iran's antagonist in a war that has been going on for four years. A tilt toward Iraq is no more appealing; it would align us with an odious, Soviet-backed regime.

Emphasizing that he speaks as an academic theorist and not as a spokesman for the Navy, Bernstein says that a naval strategy offers the best option for impressing on the Ayatollah that he cannot connive at the killing or kidnapping of American citizens with impunity. To prosecute its war with Iraq, Iran needs arms, which come to it in ships from places like North Korea. If these ships fly the Iranian flag, they can be stopped, boarded, and the arms seized; or they can be sunk at sea. If they fly a neutral flag, they can be escorted to a friendly harbor and their passage to Iran delayed while Iraq prepares another blow. No, or little, moral odium, no 6 o'clock news; no galvanic effect on Iranian morale - these are the advantages Bernstein claims for a naval strategy of reprisal.

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Of course, even this measured form of retaliation entails risk. Who knows what Khomeini would do in response? Several weeks ago, an unusually high-placed Iranian delegation was reported visiting Moscow - a development that cannot have pleased the State Department.

Khomeini in trouble

From all accounts, Khomeini's back is to the wall and his country in desperate straits. In the last two weeks alone, something like a half-million people have fled Tehran to escape Iraqi bombing raids. Frank Fukuyama, Mideast Iran expert at the Rand Corporation, says that Iran may be on the verge of internal collapse, perhaps even a civil war between rival factions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, Khomeini's KGB.

One faction wants to spread revolutionary Shiism and to strike at Satan no matter the cost; the others wants to end the wasting war with Iraq and resume normal diplomatic relations with Europe, though not yet with Satan. Fukuyama fears that any United States retaliation against Iran might undercut the domestic position of this latter faction, which includes people with whom we might be able to deal in a post-Khomeini Iran.

* One would hate to do anything that would strengthen the clerical fascist regime in Tehran. Still, if the hostages are harmed, or put on trial, or held past what the diplomats call "a date certain," then we simply must act.

The Islamic Republic of Iran very possibly owes its survival to an inhibition of geography: if it did not share a 1000-mile long border with the Soviet Union, we should long since have used force to counter what some analysts term Iran's "low-intensity warfare" against the United States.

An aggressive naval strategy would hurt Iran without causing internal chaos of the sort which the Soviets could exploit. The prospect of an arms blockade in the midst of a desperate war might force Khomeini to press his Shiite brothers not only to let our people go but to keep their rabid hands off them in the future.

It just might work; certainly, if we don't try, it will be open season on Americans abroad. Satan cannot afford to sleep any longer.

Jack Beatty is a senior editor at The Atlantic Monthly.